

The Capital of Scandinavia

Sweden is a fascinating country, although it doesn't appear that way at first. The Stockholm airport tries hard to sell you on the city's importance, lining the walls with the faces of famous residents, none of whom I recognize. Stockholm is "The Capital of Scandinavia", at least according to the wall, the information desk, and the "You Are Here" signs spread around the city. All the signs are in English as well as Swedish and we didn't see a single person the entire trip who couldn't speak English (although one declined to).

Nor does the ride from the airport suggest anything special — the road is lined with the office parks of big companies, much like the streets of Silicon Valley. And the city seems, well, like a city, at least until you realize that's your apartment, not simply downtown.

Most American cities are still suffering from the "urban planning" designed to keep non-existent factory fumes away from people's homes. Even in San Francisco, where all sorts of crazy things are crammed into one small peninsula, there is still a clear separation of residence and business — blocks of victorian row houses, then a cross street with a bunch of shops.

But as far as I could tell, Stockholm doesn't have any such residential zones. All the apartments seemed to be on the floor above the normal street life; the two deeply intertwined; just the way I like it. (See *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* for more reasons.)

The apartments — *all* the apartments — are rent controlled, one of the socialist remnants in Sweden's social democracy. In practice, this leads to some odd results. No one ever gives up an apartment, so tenants feel safe installing nameplates on their doors. Instead of giving up the place, they give it to their family, their friends, or let their children inherit it. Once you have an apartment contract, you can swap it with anyone else's (and there are web sites to help you do this), but to get one you need to add your name to a list when you turn 18, and then wait for ten to twenty years for an apartment to open up. Those with money but not that kind of time instead pay under the table for a contract.

There are no homeless people in Stockholm, but one person I spoke to claimed that this was because the homeless didn't know anyone with a rent contract, so they all stayed in the suburbs, which they were more familiar with anyway, and as a result there ended up being about as many homeless per capita as in a the average American city.

Backlash politics is incredibly popular in the US, where there's not that much to backlash against, but it's even more popular in Sweden, where there's some justification. US-style libertarians are everywhere, this time with some actual justification for their persecution complexes. Although not much. A new conservative government has recently taken power and has pulled all the libertarians out to fill up the political positions.

Our roommate just happened to hang out with libertarians in college; now all her friends are top officials in the government. A smaller country, it starts to seem like everyone knows everybody here (I suppose they all went to college together).

Of course, there are still outsiders. The country has private email mailing lists on which all the gossip about how the county is *actually* run (and who the royalty is *actually* screwing) is shared among the prominent journalists and other figures. (There are similar secret lists in other fields, including one for the left-wing of the US Democratic Party.) Journalists know that sharing that kind of information with the public simply isn't done and those who violate the rules are unceremoniously kicked off. Occasionally a young reporter uses their column to complain they're not on the list, but the people in the know just laugh at them.

It's the same kind of laugh you imagine Sweden's IKEA founders having [as you marvel at their clever tax-dodging schemes](#). IKEA, the famed Swedish interior design chain now sweeping the US, is owned by a company called Ingka Holding, which is actually owned by a tax-exempt not-for-profit — the world's largest, even larger than the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (Not that selling interior furnishings is at all comparable to curing Malaria.) The not-for-profit channels its funds to a Dutch foundation which is operated by a Swiss lawyer friend but shares some of its assets with another Dutch company which is owned by a Luxembourg holding company which is owned by a company in the Netherlands which is run by a trust in the Carribean. You can probably guess where the tax-free money goes from there.

IKEA is everywhere in Sweden. Their couches fill the tiny rent-controlled apartments, their chairs are found in everyone's offices, and when you finish your drink the light shining through the bottom of the glass illuminates the word: IKEA.

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